

Methodologically a novel experience: Understanding the Sri Lankan primary school children through a longitudinal study (2002- 2006)

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With the intention of enriching indigenous research literature on primary school children of Sri Lanka, a longitudinal research was initiated in 2002. The main objective of the research was to observe a cohort of students who entered Grade 1 in 2002 continuously and provide a detailed description of patterns of stability and change in participation in school education and a coherent explanation of how changes have occurred or failed to occur in the selected aspects of competencies. The study focused on two themes, student participation in primary school education and the way the students develop their competencies.

Forty-three classrooms from forty-one schools that represent the diverse social, cultural, economic, demographic, geographical and educational backgrounds of the country were selected as the school sample and all new entrants to Grade 1 in January 2002 (1021) were considered as the student sample. Teachers collected data and a researcher was appointed to each school to guide the teacher. Each researcher conducted a case study on a randomly selected child, resulting 43 case studies. Perceptions of teachers, researchers and parents, classroom artifacts, observations of teachers and researchers, documents, Interviews with children, teachers, and parents, planned activities assigned to children were the data collection methods.

32 researchers appointed to schools to guide teachers and conduct the case studies were academically qualified in research. They, however, did not grasp the difference between survey method and longitudinal study and it took considerable effort on the part of the core researchers to acquaint with them of the new mode of the methodology. In the report writing stage they were inclined to write survey reports rather than longitudinal research reports, resulting in recasting of texts using original data. At the data analysis stage too, analysts tried to analyze data, considering them as survey data. Having themselves equipped with formulas and statistical methods/ packages close to their research experience, they were surprised when they were made aware of the longitudinal nature of data sets.

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